

OpenTheo

Joel: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

February 18, 2022



Alastair Roberts

CONTENTS

00:00:00 - Chapter 1: The Locust Invasion

00:15:29 - Chapter 2: The Day of the Lord

00:35:10 - Chapter 3: The Lord Enters into Judgment with the Nations

If you have enjoyed my videos and podcasts, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

The Book of Joel, the second prophet within the Book of the Twelve, is a difficult book upon which to get a handle. Whether we are trying to determine who Joel was, the time and the context of his ministry, or the character of the historical events concerning which he prophesied, we will most likely achieve little more than informed speculations, although at points these may feel tantalizingly close to giving us some sense of the prophet and his times. Numerous dates have been suggested for the book, from the first half of the 9th to around the 4th centuries BC.

Within this wide range of potential dates, we have early, between 870 and 860 BC, and later pre-exilic dates down to fairly late post-exilic dates, down to the first half of the 4th century. Positions on the question of dating the book also don't neatly divide scholars

along a conservative versus liberal fault line. The dating of the book tends to depend upon how we account for specific details within it.

Allusions to other nations and places, such as Egypt, Edom, Philistia, Greece, the Sibeans and Sidon, all need to be explained. The destruction of Sidon in 345 BC means that chapter 3, verse 4 must almost certainly be dated before that. A very early reference to the Greeks would also be surprising, although not as surprising as some earlier commentators have suggested.

Late references to the surrounding nations as threatening independent states would also be unexpected. The interpreter must further explain the violence committed by Egypt and Edom against Judah that is referred to in chapter 3, verse 19. The reference to Judah as Israel in chapter 3, verse 2 has been taken as evidence for a later date, as such a reference might be less likely prior to the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

However, Carl Keller is an example of a commentator who sees this reference to Israel as looking back upon the downfall of the northern kingdom, so perhaps not much can be rested upon this particular detail. There are several references to priests and to acts of worship in Jerusalem, but no references to a king, which has been taken by many as giving weight to the case for a post-exilic dating. The extent to which the temple was still standing and operative has also been questioned, as there is limited reference to the temple, save as a vestibule and a site of sacrifice.

In Jeremiah chapter 41 we see that even after the fall of Jerusalem, the temple was still operating in some sense as a site of sacrifice. The apparent reference to the wall in chapter 2, verse 7 is another possible constraint for dating, albeit a weak one, especially when we consider that the wall was never completely destroyed, and that the reference in that verse might be figurative. The books on either side of Joel in the book of the Twelve, Hosea and Amos, are dated relatively early, but there are different orderings of the book of the Twelve where it is placed later.

The placing of prophets within the larger book of the Twelve has more to do with thematic ordering than chronological ordering. Determining relationships between prophets in the form of intertextual allusions will also help us in dating the text. Chapter 2, verse 32 is likely dependent upon Obadiah, verse 17, so presumably Joel must be dated after Obadiah, which is most likely exilic or post-exilic.

In some cases supposed lines of dependence between prophets may reverse, depending on our judgements concerning their dating. In this case however, Joel seems to be referring to a previous prophecy, writing, so Obadiah was almost certainly the earlier of the two prophecies. Several of the many connections with other prophecies are mentioned by Christopher Seitz, who remarks upon the extensive pattern of mutual influence in the book of the Twelve, for which Joel is a prominent culminating exemplar.

As if they weren't complicated enough, questions of dating can be further entangled with the consideration of the possibility that the book contains material from two distinct periods. For some, this is a matter of the book coming from different hands, with the book being of weak integrity. Another possibility is that the same figure, Joel the son of Pethuel, had a ministry spanning distinct periods, from the very late pre-exilic period to the beginning of the exilic period, for instance.

A further question that will weigh in our considerations of dating is our interpretation of the locust plague that is a central feature of the book. Is the plague an actual plague of locusts, a figurative reference to an invading army, or some other form of reference to the destruction of the people at the hands of the Babylonians? Another possible reading is that there is a literal plague of locusts in chapter 1, anticipating a figurative use of locusts in chapter 2. Our interpretation of this plague will be another factor weighing in our determination of the dating and occasion of the prophecy. Seitz, speaking as a representative of canonical criticism, makes the point that Joel must, irrespective of his original historical context, be read first and foremost in his context in the canon, as the second of the Book of the Twelve, without merely being ambivalent to questions such as the dating of the book.

This is not, in fact, the most important interpretative matter. It is far more important, for instance, that within the context of the Book of the Twelve, Joel serves to introduce the theme of the Day of the Lord, that will be at the heart of much that follows within the collection, perhaps coming to its climactic expression in the Book of Zephaniah, in common with the prophetic witness of Scripture more generally, but in a more pronounced manner. In the canon, the writings of the Prophet Joel are drawn into a body of literature that is partly abstracted from the immediacy of its own historical context.

The words of this prophecy speak beyond the immediacy of its historical occasion, helping the faithful and attentive hearer to discern something of the shape of God's work, character, and the manner of the great day of his coming. We hardly know anything about the Prophet Joel. He seems to have been a Judean, and his message focuses upon Jerusalem, and particularly upon its worship.

In contrast to many other prophets, nothing is said about kings and other national leaders are more noticeable by their absence. In Joel, the theme of the Day of the Lord first becomes prominent in the Book of the Twelve. The prophecy itself begins with a summons to attention, first addressed to the elders, and then to all the inhabitants of the land.

A disaster of such magnitude is happening in their own days, that the shock waves of the news of it would pass down through coming generations. The disaster is described as a plague of locusts, with four different waves of them coming in succession, each eating anything left behind by the swarm that preceded it. We are, of course, familiar with the

plague of locusts in Exodus chapter 10, the eighth of the plagues that befell the land of Egypt by the hand of the Lord through his servant Moses.

However, locusts were also associated with divine judgment elsewhere, for instance in the earlier prophecy of Amos chapter 7 verses 1 to 3. There the locusts seem to be a symbol of some judgment. Here the locusts are described as an invading force coming upon the nation to ravage its land. Commentators are divided about whether to understand the locust plague of this chapter as a literal locust plague, or as a figurative plague of locusts.

Elsewhere in scripture, invading armies or devouring forces are described like locusts. The Midianites and Amalekites are described as coming upon the land like locusts in Judges chapter 6 verse 5 and 7 verse 12, covering the land and consuming its produce. In Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 14, the overwhelming of Judah by Babylon and its forces is described as akin to a locust invasion.

And in verse 27 of that chapter. In Jeremiah, the actions of this invading force are spoken of in a manner that evoke the attack of a devouring locust swarm. In chapter 5 verses 15 to 17.

It is an enduring nation. It is an ancient nation. A nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say.

Their quiver is like an open tomb. They are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food.

They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds. They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees.

Your fortified cities in which you trust, they shall beat down with the sword. Locusts serve as a symbol of an apocalyptic judgment later in scripture in Revelation chapter 9 verses 3 to 11. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth.

They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them. And their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone.

And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle.

On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold. Their faces were like human faces. Their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lion's teeth.

They had breastplates like breastplates of iron. And the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails.

They have as a king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. On the one hand, reading Joel, the actions of the locusts seem to correspond more closely to the actions of a locust swarm than to the actions of an invading army.

They are devouring all of the crops and the produce of the land, not destroying cities, killing and taking captive. In chapter 2 their movements are compared to those of soldiers in an army. It would be strange to have a locust swarm symbolising the invasion of the Babylonian army itself compared to an army.

This would make for a rather convoluted metaphor. On the other hand, while the locust plague could be devastating, the severity of what Joel describes seems to be greater than even a terrible locust plague could account for. And what the prophecy doesn't describe also seems notable.

There is no extensive description of famine conditions in the land. Rather, the focus is upon drunkards having their wine cut off, and the priests having the tribute offering cut off. There aren't descriptions of people wasting away with hunger.

The locust invasion then seems to afflict the animals and the worship of the house of the Lord the most. It is the grain, the wine, other fruits of the land, and the flocks and herds, all associated with feasts and sacrifices that are especially struck, leaving the nation without the material that it needs to worship. Perhaps we ought to see this as a symbol of the divine devastation of Israel's feasts and worship, leaving them unable to celebrate.

My judgement is that the locust plague is most likely a symbol representing the historical events associated with the overthrow of Judah by Babylon, the various waves of attack and deportation for instance. However, the locust plague is a symbol of a divine invasion. The locust plague is like the divine war cloud.

In its appearance, it's reminiscent of the dark cloud that descended upon Sinai, but it's a living cloud of devouring judgement that will descend upon the land and strip everything bare. While on the visible historical plane, this is taking place through the agency of the Babylonians, this is not the day of Babylon, but the day of the Lord and of his judgement cloud. The leaders of the people are like a group of drunkards who are suddenly to be brought to their senses as the wine is removed from their lips by the advent of the locusts.

The locusts are compared to beasts of prey, to lions, which perhaps lends weight to the

idea that we aren't dealing with typical locusts here. The locust swarm is stripping the Lord's vine and fig tree, both symbols for his people. Alongside the leaders of the people are the priests, who are also particularly struck by this plague.

They are charged to lament with all of the anguish of a betrothed virgin, bereaved of her husband. The locust invasion cuts off the tribute offerings, causing the priests and the land to mourn. The people lose the means by which they would offer to the Lord.

The land, the people and the temple can be depicted agriculturally. The nation is often compared to a field, to a land, to a tree, to growing crops, or something similar. It can be harvested like a field, or burned or felled in judgment like a great forest.

It can be watered and flourish, or it can experience drought and wither away. Joel is very much working within such a symbolic frame of reference. Within such a frame of reference, the temple is the chief place of gathering.

The temple was quite literally built upon a threshing floor, and it retains much of the symbolism associated with that. The great threshing floor of the land, where all of the first fruits and fine produce would be prepared, is left empty by divine judgment. The figures here represented as tillers and vinedressers are likely other leaders among the people, who had failed adequately to guard the people of the Lord's special planting.

The priests are charged not just to lament the disaster that has befallen them, but to direct their mourning towards the Lord. They are to recognize the Lord's hand in what has happened, call a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people together, and summon them to call out to the Lord for deliverance. He, not the Babylonians or some other force, is the one who has ultimately struck them, and it is to him that they must look to for deliverance.

The language of verse 15 is similar to that which we see in Isaiah chapter 13 verse 6, Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come. And also in Ezekiel chapter 30 verses 2 to 3, Wail, alas for the day, for the day is near, the day of the Lord is near. It will be a day of clouds, a day of doom for the nations.

The land is being stripped of its fruit and rendered barren. The herds and the flocks, which might represent the people more generally, now have nowhere left to graze. In addition to the image of the locust invasion, there is the additional image of a fire in verses 19 to 20, a fire that devours the pasture land and the forests.

In addition to the consuming force of the locusts and the fires burning up the land, there is the further crisis of a drought, leaving the land parched and the animals of the land thirsty. The Lord is the one who gives fertility and fruitfulness to the land. He gives it its rains and its seasons.

When he cuts off his good gifts, everything will start to perish. The only hope in such a

time is to turn back in repentance to him and seek his face once more. A question to consider, can you think of any other places in Scripture where agricultural imagery is used symbolically to represent the Lord's judgment upon his people? The relationship between the locust invasion of chapter 2 and that of chapter 1 of the Book of Joel is debated by commentators.

On the surface of things, the events of this chapter might seem to be different from the events of chapter 1. Chapter 1 seems to look back to something that has already befallen the people, while chapter 2 anticipates some disaster yet to strike. John Barton, responding to Hans Walter Wolfe, however, challenges the sharp differentiation between the events of the two chapters. He argues that nothing can really be said about the time reference of the prophecy on the basis of the verb forms used.

It is possible that chapter 1 is predictive, even though it uses perfect verb forms. Chapter 2 could even be referring to a past event, despite its use of the imperfect. Chavdar Hadjiev observes that in verses 3 to 9 of this chapter, perfect and imperfect verb forms can be found in parallel statements, undermining any argument that rests heavily upon the tenses that are used.

Barton's understanding is that both chapters refer to the same locust invasion. He also disputes the idea that the language of this chapter is heightened to such a degree that would legitimate the judgment that chapter 2 refers to a greatly intensified disaster, perhaps even a disaster of a completely different kind. Chapter 1 already referred to an unprecedented event, the report of which would be passed down through the generations.

It also related the judgment to the Day of the Lord in verse 15. Is it a new wave of the locusts, the next stage in a multi-stage disaster, or is it a shift from literal locust to locust as a symbol of some greater form of invasion, or is it the same disaster described in heightened language? Despite key similarities such as those that Barton identifies and the danger of overstating the escalation of the crisis, the threat of the locusts in this chapter does seem to be elevated from that of the preceding chapter. Leslie Allen remarks, The literal description of the same disaster is a matter that the interpreter of this chapter will need to determine.

Throughout this chapter, Joel uses the language of military invasion, with war horses, chariots, a mighty army, warriors, soldiers, and the storming of cities to describe the host that is descending upon the people. These, however, are similes and metaphors. It might be a little odd if a locust swarm were being used as a metaphor for an invading army, while being itself compared to an army at several points.

As a metaphor, a locust invasion is a powerful one, not least because it evokes the Exodus narrative, presenting Judah as a new Egypt. The eighth plague in Exodus chapter 10 is also described as unprecedented, as such a quantity of locusts had never been

seen before or would be since. A crucial dimension to consider is the way that the Lord relates to the locust invasion.

In places like verse 10, the locusts are presented as the Lord's own host, coming on his great day. While this could be an instance of prophetic hyperbole, such hyperbole would seem to me to be excessive, exaggerating the significance of the invasion of the locusts by downplaying the import of the day of the Lord. A locust invasion could be utterly devastating, but whether such an event would be altogether without precedent in its destructive power upon the nation, and whether the report of it would go down through the generations, is more debatable.

The apocalyptic note on which the description of the locust invasion concludes stretches the idea that a merely literal locust invasion is in view to breaking point, in my judgment. Furthermore, this chapter focuses its portrayal of the locust attack upon their assault upon the city, their scaling of its wall, and their unhindered entrance into its buildings. While locusts could invade urban environments and human dwellings in such a manner, indeed such an invasion is mentioned in the eighth plague in Exodus chapter 10, the far greater threat was their consuming of the crops and the fields.

While Exodus 10 does mention the locusts entering all of the houses in the announcement of the plague, when the devastation wrought by the plague is described, nothing is said about what they consumed indoors. The devastation was overwhelmingly in the fields and on the face of the land more generally. In verse 20 the Lord promises that he will remove the northerner from the people, which would be a strange way to refer to the locusts.

On balance, I think that the locust invasion refers to the waves of judgment that fell upon Jerusalem from Babylon in the years leading up to its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, and perhaps even after the downfall of Gedoliah as governor too. These waves stripped the land of its people and destroyed its national life. As the land is symbolized by agricultural images, the successive locust invasions are an utter despoliation of its life, ultimately leaving the land with nothing.

A watchman in a tower on Jerusalem's walls looks towards the horizon as a thick black cloud approaches rapidly from the north. Fear striking his heart, he sounds the alarm on his trumpet. The city is thrown into tumult as the sun is blotted out by the vast locust army that fills the skies.

As this invading force nears the city, the watchers on the wall can see that the black cloud has a fire behind and before it, consuming everything in its path. Lands as verdant as paradise itself before it are left like a smoking and desolate wasteland in its wake. Nothing can halt its rapid advance.

And then, as it comes even nearer, they start to hear the sounds. At first a low hum, then

a growling rumble, accompanied with the crackling sound of a great fire approaching. What initially seems like a cloud from a distance is now seen to be a living, swarming mass moving in perfect unison, like a well-disciplined military force.

Within the thick black cloud that is now shrouding the heavens can be seen the appearance of something like myriads upon myriads of military chargers galloping towards the city, not diverting from their course for any obstacle in their way. Terror grips everyone. The colour washes from people's faces.

The wave crashes into the walls of the city, but rather than spending its force upon them, the wave ascends the walls, spills over the top of them, and descends into the city on the other side. It bursts into houses. It fills all of the places.

By this point, the rumbling sound has been accompanied with the thunderous shaking of the earth. Indeed, the whole cosmos seems to be unsettled. The people look up, and it is as if the very heavens are being extinguished above them.

The sun and moon darkened, and the stars covered. The imagery of cosmic judgement here is reminiscent of places like Isaiah chapter 13, verses 4-10 of that chapter. The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will be bright at its setting.

We might also observe here that the disasters being described follow the pattern of the final wave of the Egyptian plagues before the concluding capstone plague of the killing of the firstborn. The plagues of the Exodus came in three successive cycles. In the final cycle, there were three waves of plagues.

The hail mixed with fire, the locusts, and the darkness. Here we have fire going before a thick cloud of locusts, and then the blotting out of the heavens. All of this suggests that the lights are finally about to be turned out over Judah.

We might also pay attention to the theophanic elements of the imagery here. A black cloud advancing with a thunderous sound, surrounded by fire, filled with living creatures, moving in perfect unison, accompanied by the dreadful voice of the Lord, heralded by the blast of a trumpet. All of this is the sort of imagery that we might associate with events such as the Lord's appearance to his people at Mount Sinai, or the throne chariot vision of Ezekiel chapter 1. The Day of the Lord imagery here is also similar to that found elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve, for instance in Zephaniah chapter 1, verses 14 to 18.

A day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities, and against the lofty battlements. Here, in Joel chapter 2, the imagery is of Zion, the Lord's holy hill, under extreme threat, with a terrible and unearthly army approaching it. However, the hearer discovers that this army is actually the army of the Lord himself.

What, then, does this correspond to historically? My suspicion is that this is referring to

the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians, but in a way that reveals the greater army behind Nebuchadnezzar's army, the army of the Lord himself. As a vision of the Day of the Lord, however, there is a telescopic character to the imagery. As in the Olivet Discourse in the Gospels, where such language is used of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, such imagery relates to specific historical events, as the Lord comes in climactic judgement.

However, the imagery of such passages does not merely narrowly refer to a specific event in history, but to the broader theological reality of the Day of the Lord more generally, a reality that can be expressed in even more pronounced and dramatic ways. The Day of the Lord, as depicted in the Book of the Twelve, should be paradigmatic for our thinking about the concept more generally. We should not think that the concept of the Day of the Lord is exhausted either in its referent or its meaning by the events of the downfall of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians, for instance.

This is one reason why the determination of the more precise historical reference of such a prophecy is of secondary importance. Whatever the most immediate historical events to which the Day of the Lord, described by Joel, related, the reality of the Day of the Lord transcends any specific manifestation of it, still awaiting its fullest and most comprehensive expression at the end of all things. This can be indicated in part by the way that the language of the Day of the Lord in the Prophets and elsewhere in Scripture is constantly recycling imagery that's used of previous events.

We've already seen here imagery taken from the story of the Exodus, for instance, and the destruction of Egypt. There is imagery taken from Isaiah concerning the destruction of Babylon still awaited. In the New Testament, imagery from this chapter will be taken up again and applied to the time of the Apostles.

In verses 12 to 17 there is a turn in the text. From this announcement of coming judgment, there is the promise of divine mercy and restoration if the people will only return to the Lord with all of their heart. Behind this we might hear things like the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 3. In Exodus chapter 34 verses 5 to 7, The words here also seem to recall words from the book of Jonah.

In Jonah chapter 4 verse 2, this covenant statement of the Lord is recalled. But then also in chapter 3 verse 9, the king of Nineveh makes a statement that's very similar to the words of verse 14. Verse 15 recalls verse 1. The same is true for the children, down to those who are still at the breast.

As they become a byword, the Lord himself will be seen as powerless. One might think here of the way that the Lord insists in Ezekiel chapter 20, that he acted for the sake of his own name, not on account of anything that the people had done, or anything of their own deserving. Had the Lord treated his people as they deserved, they would have been cut off entirely.

After the people's turning to the Lord, after his invitation in verse 12, a great reversal starts to occur from verse 18. Verse 18 does present some challenges for the interpreter. Has something happened off the stage of the text between verses 17 and 18? Have the people heeded the word of the prophet and performed the repentance that they were charged to perform? Has the Lord relented from a disaster that he purposed? Or is this another predictive statement within the frame of the initial prophecy itself? Whatever we determine, the Lord's jealousy for his people and his land means that he will not let them go.

He loves them, they are his own people and land, and so he will not allow anything, even their own sin, to snatch them from him. He assures them that there will no longer be a reproach among the nations. He will provide them with the grain, wine and oil that were stripped from them in chapter 1. He would remove the northern enemies that had plagued them from them, and drive them away out of the land.

The description of the driving of the enemies into the sea might recall the description in Exodus chapter 10 of the removal of the locusts by the wind of the Lord into the Red Sea. The land that was stripped and despoiled by the locusts in chapter 1 and the earlier part of chapter 2 is now made verdant and fruitful once more. The fig tree and the vine are giving their full yield.

The land formerly struck by drought and fire is now enjoying abundant seasonal rains. These rains serve as Israel's vindication, the mark that the Lord is accepting them, that they are in the right before him as his people. The threshing floors once barren of grain, particularly the threshing floor of the temple itself, now overflow with produce.

Looking back to chapter 1 again, what the locusts had eaten, what they had stripped from the land formerly, would be restored to the people. We should note here that they are described as the Lord's great army, just as they are in chapter 2. The Lord would bless his people, and most of all with his own presence in their midst. And a further day of the Lord is awaited at the end of the chapter, a day of the Lord where not just rains, but the Spirit himself will be poured out on all flesh.

The prophets of Israel embodied the word of the Lord, presenting it to the people as representatives of the Lord and prosecutors of the covenant, and also representing the people to the Lord. In many ways they incarnated their message. They performed it through prophetic sign acts.

They had to eat the word, as a scroll in the case of Ezekiel, or in the case of Jeremiah, the words of the Lord being placed upon his lips, or in the case of Isaiah, his lips being touched with a burning coal. However, for most of the people, the powerful word of the Lord was far from them. It did not animate them and give them life.

It was a condemning word from outside of them, rather than a word that was written

upon the tablets of their heart. The promise of the new covenant is that the word of God will be written upon the hearts of the people. As the Spirit was placed upon the 70 elders in Numbers chapter 11 to assist Moses in his rule of the people, Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, and after Joshua wondered whether they should be silenced, Moses expressed the following desire.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them. Here in Joel chapter 2, the prophet seems to be foretelling the fulfillment of Moses' wish. This would be accompanied by cosmic portents, events in the symbolic heavens that would represent the significance of what was taking place.

Sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood. Elsewhere in scripture, such language is used at the downfall of great nations and empires. However, the day of the Lord that is awaited here is not primarily a day of destruction.

It's a day that offers the hope of salvation. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. In Obadiah verse 17, the prophet foretold this deliverance, and also the purification of the people in the city of Zion.

But in Mount Zion, there shall be those who escape, and it shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions. Joel quotes that earlier prophecy here, referring both to those who call on the name of the Lord, and those whom the Lord calls. On this great day of the Lord, where there would be the destruction of the enemies of the people, as Obadiah and Joel both proclaim, it would primarily be the Lord's salvation that would be displayed.

Mount Zion in Jerusalem would be places of deliverance, and as great judgments of God were wrought in the heavens, He would pour out His Spirit upon His people, pouring out the anointing of His people, not just upon the leaders of His people, but upon all of the people, in a manner similar to that described in Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 33-34. A question to consider, this passage from the book of Joel is perhaps most famous on account of Peter's use of it in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Why do you believe that Peter selected this particular passage, and in what manner did he see it being fulfilled in his own time? The conclusion of the prophecy of Mount Zion is that The prophecy of Joel in chapter 3 continues the hopeful themes of the reversal of Judah's fortune and its restoration first introduced in chapter 2, verse 18.

It follows from the events foretold in chapter 2, verse 28, where the Spirit would be poured out upon the people. While the first two chapters focused upon the locust invasion, and the surrounding nations were not directly mentioned, they become central to the picture in this final chapter, and are directly addressed. As Judah is set right with the Lord once more, the Lord enters into judgment with their enemies.

The coming of the day of the Lord was powerfully presented in the preceding two

chapters, and, once again, the day of the Lord is an important element of this chapter. However, now the day of the Lord has a far more positive aspect, and is something eagerly to be awaited. It will be a day of judgment and vindication, by which Judah will be established.

The other nations will face the sort of devastation that Judah itself had earlier suffered in its rebellion. The Lord's judgment of his people's oppressors on his great day is also mentioned as a feature of that day in places like Zephaniah chapter 3, verse 8. As the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, he will assemble the nations together in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, bringing them together for a greater size, judging them for the wrongs that they had committed against his people Israel. While Carl Keller is an example of someone who claims that Israel here refers to the Northern Kingdom.

Like most commentators, I believe that this is better understood as a reference to the people more generally, as the Northern Kingdom had long since fallen, and many of the wrongs that were being judged here were directed more against the Southern Kingdom of Judah. At the time that the prophecy is written, or perhaps the time to which it refers, the people had been scattered among the nations, and the land had come under the power of its neighbors, and the larger power of what was most likely Babylon, although commentators who place the prophecy later in time might relate it to one of the other powers that followed Babylon. The gathering place would be the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

The name Jehoshaphat clearly recalls the name of the Davidic King of Judah. In King Jehoshaphat's day, in an event recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, the Lord had accomplished a remarkable deliverance from a coalition of nations in the Valley of Barakka, as the Lord had set an ambush against them, and turned them against each other, so that the enemies of Judah ended up killing each other. The Valley of Jehoshaphat might be designed to recall this deliverance, as the Lord would once again miraculously save his people.

That said, the valley in question was some distance from Jerusalem, so it's not the valley that is literally in question here. In verse 14, the valley is called the Valley of Decision, and it is likely that we are supposed to understand the Valley of Jehoshaphat figuratively, recalling both the deliverance in Jehoshaphat's day, and also recognizing the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat. Yahweh judges.

Verse 12 seems to support the idea that the valley is called the Valley of Jehoshaphat, chiefly on account of the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat. Let the nations stir themselves up, and come to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. The Valley of Jehoshaphat would later come to be associated with the Kidron Wadi, or valley near Jerusalem, perhaps on the basis of other passages such as Jeremiah 31, verse 40.

The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the Brook

Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown any more forever. Of course, in scripture, valleys like the Kidron Valley, or valleys like the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, could take on a deeper symbolic significance, representing things far beyond a mere geographical location.

Elsewhere, a symbolic valley is represented as a site of great judgment, for instance in Isaiah chapter 22 with the Valley of Vision, Zechariah chapter 14, a text that is most likely later than Joel, develops the imagery of the Valley of the Lord's Judgment, describing the creation of a valley near Jerusalem, and the Lord entering into judgment against His people's enemies there. In verses 1 to 4 of that chapter, Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst, for I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken, and the houses plundered, and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city.

Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as when He fights on the day of battle. On that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, that lies before Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward.

Leslie Allen observes the resemblance between the gathering of the nations in this chapter in Joel, and Jesus' teaching of the nations being gathered before Him, and separated like sheep from goats in Matthew chapter 25. The nations had cast lots for the people, and lightly traded young Israelite slaves for a whore or for wine. While they were not like the apex predator of Babylon that had brought Jerusalem down, Tyre, Sidon and the Philistines all played their part in picking clean the bones of the defeated city and its people.

Like scavengers, they had stripped the Lord's riches and brought them into their own temples. The Lord proclaimed similar judgments against these nations elsewhere in Scripture, in places like the book of Ezekiel. They had taken His people and sold them overseas to the Greeks, far from their own land.

However, the Lord would bring their sin back upon their own heads. The very nation that they had sold would sell them. While they had sold the Judeans to the Greeks in the west, they would be sold to the Sabeans in the east, far away in the other direction.

As Allen notes, these nations were reduced to slavery and servitude in the mid-4th century BC. The summons to the Valley of Jehoshaphat is first of all a summons to battle. The nations, unwitting that they are the intended victims, are called out to war, coming up against the city of Jerusalem, where the Lord Himself would deal with them.

This great battle is one for which as many weapons as possible must be forged. Famously, Isaiah chapter 2 verse 4 prophesied a coming time of peace. Here that statement is reversed.

Farmers must become warriors and agricultural tools must be repurposed as weapons. Everyone, small and great, weak and strong, must be assembled for this great climactic battle against the Lord and His people. They do not, of course, realize that they are hastening towards the site of their own judgment and destruction, where the Lord will enact His sentence against them.

The image of the nations gathered against Jerusalem, presumably about to overwhelm it, when they are decisively judged by the Lord, is an image that occurs on a number of occasions in scripture. We might think, for instance, of the conclusion of the thousand years in Revelation chapter 20 verses 7 to 10. The outcome of this great judgment and deliverance is described in the verses that conclude the chapter.

The nations will experience the full force of the day of the Lord. The book of Joel began with devastated fields and empty wine presses due to the locust plague. Now, however, a great harvest is ripe, the wine press is full and the vats are overflowing.

The valley where all will be decided and the sentence passed is full, teeming with an innumerable horde, ready to be harvested and trodden underfoot, like grain to be cut or grapes to be trodden. Imagery of judgment as a harvest is found elsewhere in scripture, in both positive and negative forms. For instance, Revelation chapter 14 draws upon the imagery of Joel chapter 3, as angels are instructed to put in their sickles to harvest the grain and the grapes of the earth.

The imagery of the day of the Lord, of chapter 2 verses 10 to 11, with the sun and the moon being darkened and the stars withdrawing their shining, reappears in verses 15 to 16. Once again the heavens and the earth shake as the Lord utters his voice from Zion. There is a replay of the day of the Lord, but now Israel is being delivered.

The Lord will be his people's refuge and defender, no longer the unstoppable adversary against them. It is worth observing at this point that the description of the Lord roaring from Zion in verse 16 is also found at the very beginning of the book of Amos, the prophet that follows in the ordering of the book of the Twelve, in chapter 1 verse 2 of that prophecy. This is one of the thematic and literary connections between books to which many commentators draw attention.

Through his judgment upon the nations, the Lord would prove his great name, showing that he had set apart Jerusalem as the place of his special dwelling, and that he would not permit it to be defiled. The book of Joel began with a threat to the fertility and produce of the land. In verse 18 the fruitfulness of the land is bountifully restored.

While the fruitfulness and fertility of the land could include the natural blessings of rain and plentiful crops, the image here, as in the opening chapters, is likely symbolic of the blessings of the land in fellowship with the Lord in a broader sense. The description here is hyperbolic, with wine flowing down the mountainsides, milk down the hills, and none of the streambeds being dry. This restoration of the life and joy-giving fluids of the land ultimately comes from the renewed presence of the Lord in the midst of his people to bless them, particularly seen in the fountain that comes out from the sanctuary.

The locusts in the first two chapters had taken places like Eden and reduced them to desolate wilderness, but now a new Eden is being formed. The sanctuary of the temple is like a new Eden, and just as in the case of the original Eden, a river is going to flow out of it to water the lands. Of course, much as the valley of Jehoshaphat, this is not a literal river from the house of the Lord, but it is still a real, albeit symbolic one, anticipating the river of the water of life that flows from the New Jerusalem, giving healing to the nations.

In Ezekiel chapter 47, Ezekiel describes the river that will flow out of his visionary temple, bringing fruitfulness to the land, watering the dry places, and turning the salt waters sweet. Here we find a similar image. The Lord would avenge his people on their enemies.

Egypt and Edom, which had both preyed upon them, would be judged, while Judah and Jerusalem would be established forever. A question to consider, in verse 19, the prophet refers to Edom being made a desolate wilderness for the violence done to the people of Judah, shedding innocent blood in their land. Considering other statements in scripture, particularly in the prophets, to what historical events do you think that this sin might refer?